

# I AM FAITHFUL

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*For Mike*

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# I am Faithful

For a week now in the apartment below mine there's been a tiny baby, brand new to the world. When it cries what comes through the floorboards are the sounds of a catfight. Nothing human, not even close, but still the noise registers as *child in need* and pulls me from sleep by the hair. Then, lacking a baby of my own, under the direction of some biological force set askew, I check on my dog.

She's small and sturdy-looking, black and white, and sleeps as if in mid-leap, front paws tucked high against her chest, rear paws level with the line of her spine, toes pointing back. I look at her and think of nursery rhymes. *And the cow jumped over the moon...*

The inability to ignore a baby's cry is not exclusive to humans, or even mammals. It affects almost every living thing. I learned this from PBS, watching a documentary where the narrator paused meaningfully after instructing viewers to contemplate a reptile's capacity for love.

Crocodiles were the example on screen. Hatchlings chirp when threatened, and in response mother-crocodile—no matter what she's doing, even in the second spin of a death roll, ripping loose a limb to swallow—drops everything, rushing to her young. She opens her mouth—jaws that can cleave a snorkeling Floridian into torso and trunk—and the hatchlings, so small rattlesnakes will swallow them whole, dart inside to be cradled in their mother's teeth.

I tell my boss, "It's supposed to be that bad." She's just become a grandmother for the fourth time over, but when she last watched the

kids, bagged-out after an hour. When the baby wouldn't stop crying, she started to.

I consider, but decide against telling her about the young couple in Florida who slept while their dog chewed seven toes off the wrinkled pink feet of their infant son. The father was out back in a hammock, the mother napping just up the hall. Their lawyer has insisted neither parent heard a thing: exhaustion. But it was a neighbor on the other side of a vacant lot who called the police with a noise complaint.

Dispatch took a recording. "The people up the street," the neighbor says, "have a weasel in a trap." She takes a drag off a cigarette, and apologizes, "Sorry," a faint tremor in her voice. "My nerves are shot." In the background a dishwasher is running, and under the churn of water and rattle of cutlery, there's a high, desperate yowling. "Can you hear it?" she asks. "That's been my day. Can someone get out here and put the thing out of its misery?"

Lately, my feeling about Florida is: Let's call in Bugs Bunny with the saw. But then I think of the Everglades and am forced to re-evaluate.

"It's okay," I tell my boss. "Everyone's in one piece."

"Still kicking," she agrees.

"And screaming."

She shakes her head, "You're a smartass." But isn't upset, because almost immediately, she does her standard line: "I wish I wasn't out of sons."

She believes I have a sense of humor, a decent figure, and good mothering potential. My getting married has become a great concern of hers. "You can't blame me," she says. "I'm a product of my culture."

What she is, is a member of The Junior League, a native Texan, broad-shouldered, sun-tanned, and blonde, a once-upon-a-time oil heiress from the old society days when it was better to have a husband who beat you bloody than be single. Because of this, her perfect front teeth are false and one eye opens wider than the other. For lack of marriageable sons, she swears she'll find me a man who's good to his dogs. According to her, this is the surest way to gauge quality in the opposite sex.

At night, I sometimes wonder, what would it be like to share a bed? Bodies naturally fit to one another. There is evidence, in caves, in France, that our human ancestors spent the dark and terrifying nights tumbled together in piles like puppies. Starting sleep, I assume a starfish pose, all my limbs tossed wide to fill the empty space. Waking, I am always tucked tightly to myself. But, I've seen too many heartbreak articles: mothers crawling into the blankets with their babies at their breasts, who then roll in the night, to invite my dog to join me. She is not so small as a newborn, but neither, I have been told, is she so sturdy as she looks.

Rather than bring her to my bed, I go to hers. Hand cupped a millimeter from her damp black nose, her breathing is steady and soft against my palm. Inhale, exhale—as it should be. A band of eye-white shows between furred lids. A paw twitches. She is dreaming. Gently, I drag a finger along her spine, touching the way I've watched the veterinarian do, feeling her vertebrae lined up neatly.

“Something here,” the veterinarian had said, fingers pressing to my dog's back. “Just here.” She took my hand to guiding it. “Feel?”

“No,” I said.

The veterinarian's hand was a weight on mine, “Feel?”

“I don't feel anything.”

“Well,” she said, “it's there.”

In fourteenth-century wedding portraits, the bride is traditionally dressed in green—a call-back to our pagan pasts—with a dog at her feet. I learned this on a museum tour from a docent who consulted note cards poorly hidden in his jacket sleeve. It was unlikely, he explained, that the dogs found in these paintings had any relationship to the couples posing. In fact, it was unlikely there was a dog in the room at any time.

At the end of the tour, this was the one question that I asked: So if it's not their dog, why is it there? Because, the docent said, *Fido*, the most popular of dog names, is Latin for *I am faithful*.

It takes a short series of intuitive leaps to understand that explanation. Here's a joke that works the same way: Why do women have legs? So they don't leave a trail. Or another: What's the difference between pink and purple? The grip. Here's a joke that I prefer: What did the

dyslexic, agnostic, insomniac do? Stayed up all night, worrying about the meaning of Dog.

My father's idea of humor was to spread his hands and say, "It's a dog's life." By which he meant that dogs are the family members we can murder without the threat of serious consequence. To my mother, laughing, he would say, "You're so miserable, if you were a dog, I'd take you out back and shoot you."

In that spirit, this is, for me, *The Waste Land* of jokes: A man and a boy are walking in the woods. It's getting dark. The boy says, "I'm scared!" And the man replies, "I don't know what *you're* complaining about! *I'm* the one that's gotta walk outta here alone!"

My first boyfriend never had a dog. A family like that: mother, father, and son—by the time I came along, they should have been on their second or third Golden Retriever, or big blond Labrador, or have had a Boxer for a guard dog, at least. The kids I went to school with, the children of his social class, had fathers who showed a preference for Boxers. Growing up, I knew a mess of Beaus, Rockys, and Brutuses. They slept on plaid flannel beds by stonework fireplaces, doing an odd double-duty, family pet and intended menace.

As I hung my sweater on the child-high hooks those houses always had, the father would come down the hall, crouching to ask, "Are you scared of dogs?" I wasn't. "It's a big dog," the father would caution. Then, when the animal came flying into the room, he would make a show of holding it back. "It's okay. It's okay," he would say, as the dog, over-eager, lunged against his grip.

At birthday parties there were little girls who would twist and scream, though their own dogs at home behaved the same way. Sixty pounds of unchecked enthusiasm, the worst they would do was knock someone over, step on them a little, slobber on their face. But still, girls would cry themselves sick. Some had to go home.

The mother in the house would hiss, "Could you do something with that animal!" until the father gave up giving un-obeyed commands, and finally, bribed the dog away. Leading it, not outside to a chain strung from tree to woodshed, or soldered to a metal spike hammered into the

ground. Lured clear of the company, the dogs were “put up”—a phrase I’ve heard instructing children who are done with their toys, but leave them strewn about—in a plastic kennel, or wicker cage raised on wooden feet, kept in a clean corner, at the back of the kitchen, or in the foyer, or in the cool darkness of some spare unused space upstairs.

My father kept dogs, and was particular about them in the way that other men are the cars they’ll drive, or the women they’ll date. Within a month of my mother leaving him, he had a new woman moved in. She was a dishrag soul, and he treated her as a dog, absent the respect he gave chosen members of that species. He refused to be seen with her in public, but liked having her around the house. Without expectations for her treatment, she seemed grateful to be of service and was content to be reprimanded—warranted or not—so long as it meant she might eventually be forgiven.

But, about the things that truly mattered to him, my father had his standards. Red Nose Pit Bulls were his dog of choice: forty pounds of muscle and snap. His were smaller than generally preferred in sporting-circuits, but were all descendants of a lion-eyed Irish Old Family Dog named Haul, a celebrity so far as an animal who has never taken or saved a human life can be, a weight-pull champion on dirt, snow, and rails. It was a pedigree that forgave my father’s dogs their size.

Before the pit bulls, there was a high-strung Doberman, and later, an inherited Rottweiler bitch, and overlapping, an assortment of small, long-lived lapdogs with free run of the house: my mother’s pets. With their little faces between her hands, she would say, “I sha’n’t be gone long—you come too.” So we all knew some Robert Frost by heart—me, and the dogs alike.

Once, I found my college roommates, three Connecticut blondes, gathered around a newspaper, making shrill noises of excitement and distress. I assumed their enthusiasm to be over horoscopes, an especially favorable alignment of the stars. “Wait until you hear this,” one said. “It’s the worst thing ever.” Then I thought there must have been a rape or robbery or killing on campus, and because of it, the cancellation of some event—no midnight swimming, or XXX bingo in the Union.

But no—

They were beside themselves over a man with more puppies than he could find homes. He shot two without any problem, but the third wouldn't stop squirming, making it difficult to aim. When he went down on his knees to pin it, there was an accident positioning the barrel. The puppy somehow managed to shoot the man, and he eventually died from the wound. The *worst thing*, the thing that so moved my roommates, was not the man's death, but his intention.

There is, I think, an assumption of malice when we hear a story like that. But, what if it were only matter-of-fact? Like, there's a kind of man who shoots a dog, because a dog is a dog. He's the same man who drowns newborn puppies by the sack-full every spring then ticks it from the list of chores in his head. He's seen the public service announcements: *Spay and neuter your pets*. But, he doesn't have pets. He has dogs. He's the same kind of man who is superstitious of bodies opened and altered. He doesn't say so—he wouldn't say so—but he believes the medical-arts to be a sort of dark magic. Doctors make him sweat. He's a man who doesn't admit to fear, and so when he is afraid he is angry. He's the man who dies of a slowly consuming cancer, an abscess left to fester. He's the man taken down by a clogged valve in his heart, thirty slow years in the making. That kind of man: he's a tough old bastard, but he's never meant any harm. On the anniversary of his death, his sons drink, because their father was a tough old bastard and they hated him, but he never meant any harm, and they loved him too.

The Rottweiler—I do not call it *our*—came to us through an act of would-be kindness. Someone died who had loved it very much. Rather than have the dog put down, it was given to our family, who didn't want it, but couldn't refuse it, and it lived outside on a wire run. In the coldest weather, my father brought it into the house, but kept it chained on a short length screwed to the mudroom floor. Not cruelty—it was a dog. There was a blanket for it between the drying wood and winter boots. But the Rottweiler was not allowed into the house proper, and so it was kept chained, because before, brought inside, it would not stay where it was told, was always belly-sliding forward, the tips of claws-then-feet-

then-muzzle creeping into carpeted rooms where it neither belonged nor was welcome to be.

I love my dog in a way that defies description and qualifiers, though those are all I have to offer. *She's my dog*. I love the way her feet smell: like corn chips or warm bread or waffles, depending on the day. I love her wet nose on my neck, the two of us on the couch, her laid out on my chest like a baby. I love how she freezes when she sees a dove then drops to her belly and stalks it, the tips of her ears showing above the overgrown grass. I love her flat, comedienne face. I love her sense of humor. She has one—I know it. I love her bulbous, salty eyes that I sometimes kiss by mistake when we are playing our silliest game: Torture of a Thousand Kisses. I love how she is cold after being reprimanded, how she sulks, how as revenge she will steal small electronics and hide them—my misplaced phone found buried under a pillow. I love her mind.

Here is a true story: when she was just a puppy, I signed my dog up for obedience classes. The training method involved a small metal “clicker” and treats given as reward for commands obeyed. “Sit,” I said, clicking, and when she sat, I clicked again, and fed her a little biscuit. The evening after that first class, I heard the sound of the clicker—*click-klok-click-klok*—coming from the kitchen, and there was my dog, sitting at attention, working it with her mouth, looking up at the jar of Milk Bones on the countertop. And if that doesn't prove her intelligence, there's this: she knows how to dance. We do The Madison together to oldies rock. I do not hold her in my arms. I step, this way, that way, forward and back, and she, my little monkey, mirrors me.

My dog, a particularly blunt veterinarian told me, is “compromised.” Meaning, she has a series of health issues, which will, as she ages, create more. Asked for her honest opinion, the veterinarian pulled no punches. “She'll have no quality of life,” she said then offered a solution I rejected. The vet walked us to the door, where she knelt and took my dog's head in her hands. “It's your job,” she said, looking up at me, tilting my dog's face toward mine, “to take care of her. She depends on you.”

My father spent most of his time with his pit bulls, walking the property line, visiting each one, touching their short-cropped ears and rubbing balm into the cracked pads of their feet. Sometimes he took them all off their runs, brought them up onto the lawn and arranged them in a row. When he held his hand flat they dropped and turned to stone, a line of sphinxes waiting for the next command.

My dog is a little terrier, genetically fitted with giant conical ears that are as expressive as her eyes. Cropping and docking have only recently passed out of fashion for her breed. Even five years ago she'd have been done up like a Doberman—ears cut into high, tapering points, her tail docked at the cartilage, like a thumb taken off at the knuckle.

Historically, dogs' ears were cropped not for aesthetics, but for safety and ease of upkeep, the same theory that has been applied, for centuries, to the shaving of the heads of soldiers. Ratters and fighting dogs, sport baiters paired against bulls and bears and wolverines, as well as their own brothers and sisters in the ring, and, in more domestic settings, the quick little terriers on guard against various barnyard varmints—for them, dangling ears made a tender grip for the enemy. Removing the pinna, the outer flesh, kept the thin, unprotected skin, from being caught between teeth and shredded into fringe.

There are still sand-floored rings made with scraped up plywood and two-by-four supports. Ears cut tight to the skull and angled back—a battle crop—is emblematic of a fighting dog. But what's a benefit in a fight becomes a hindrance outside of it. Exposed, into the fragile labyrinth of the inner ear goes rainwater, goes dirt, goes insects. Dogs are left deaf from the complications of a bad crop. Their whole head becomes an infection. Not so irregularly, they die from it.

Docking is what's done to the tail, and is a lesser procedure. The Romans believed it could prevent rabies. On a working dog, the absence of a tail is a few less inches to pick up burrs. My father, who quizzed me on trivia that interested him, did his docking and dewclaws both with a pocketknife at the kitchen table when the puppies were three days old. Cropping, if a person has any sort of discretion, should wait until the dog is older, when how to shape the ears to best flatter the skull can be

reasonably judged. Most of my father's dogs lived. Few scarred. I have read that bears lick their babies into shape.

After my boyfriend—the one who'd never had a dog—left for college, his parents bought a puppy. An ash gold Lhasa Apso: The Tibetan lion-dog. She patrolled the house, warning off the mailman with a surprisingly aggressive bark. As she grew, she would gnash her teeth at the open mail slot. They took her to a trainer, and were disappointed to learn that their dog's forefathers were carefully bred to serve as guards. The behaviors they did not like were living in her blood. She might be trained against them, but could not be un-taught instinct.

In their antiquity, Lhasa Apsos followed intruders from room to room, barking an alert to the Temple monks. "I didn't want an aggressive animal," my boyfriend's mother said, and after an anxious year, had the dog put down.

Our Doberman was partially skinned, dragged through a quarter-open car-door-window one sunny August morning by a square-jawed Mastiff, who had clambered over the pickets of a fence three houses up the street from the post office. My mother was inside doing errands, and I was a small child left dozing in the car with the Doberman on watch. The mastiff, a dog more substantial in both size and violence, caught our Doberman by his skinny throat, teeth punching through the double folds running the length of his neck, and by that slippery grip—tearing through thin, wadded flesh, and snapping, biting deeper—was trying to pull our Doberman through the window gap, out to meet his death. The Mastiff was succeeding. One ear peeled cleanly back from our Doberman's picky skull. It hung there, dangling at his neck like a black balloon leaked of all its air, and I slept. At first, I was sleeping—a small child blowing bubbles of spit, strapped into a booster seat, left safe, though the car doors did not lock, protected by our Doberman.

I can remember my mother saying, "I'll be right back. Two shakes of a lamb-y-kins tail," then drowning in the heat.

My mother, just through the post office's double doors, was using the pink sponge on the counter to moisten strips of glue tape, sealing

boxes of old books to ship off to Florida in exchange for oranges—a system of trade I still don't understand. When the oranges came, some would be rotten, pulsing with bugs, but others were perfect, shining, and the fruit inside was the warm lick-able color of the tiles in the changing room at the pool. In secret I sometimes licked those tiles, expecting sharp flavor. I can remember the oranges, and the orange of the tiles—their smoothness against the slight, pebbled roughness of my tongue—and in the grocery, when I pass the pyramids of citrus fruits, I smell chlorine, and sometimes, with scars to show, I tell the story of how our Doberman saved my little life. But what he really did was shit on me in his panic, and with his flailing hind feet—not the Mastiff's teeth at all—tear my skin open, deep, almost to the bone.

I jerk awake to an animal squall. My heartbeat is in my throat, dizzying. Before I've thought to do it, the covers are flicked back. I'm moving down the hall. Against my soles the floorboards quiver faintly, possessed by the baby's cries. Now that I recognize the sound—the infant below in a fit—I could turn back to bed, spread out, let my pulse slow, and invite sleep come again, but instead, I check on my dog.

She is asleep, unbothered by the baby's bawling, stretched long, front legs extended, stiff, one hind leg back, the other tucked to her belly. I take it by the foot, pulling gently, straightening. I will line it up with the other limb. As her knee bends there is a *crack*, not so pure a sound as a tree branch snapped, but still sharp, and my dog, instantly awake, flinches from my touch.

My father put our Doberman down himself. He wrapped the dog in a tarp to keep the blood off his clothes, then carried it to the edge of the woods and shot it in the head. It was in bad shape, suffering. What he did was probably the kinder thing. When my boyfriend's parents put their Lhasa down, the veterinarian gassed it into pliancy first, so they could hold it like a baby—have a calm farewell. After they were satisfied, an injection was administered.

As a child I had perfected sneaking out my window and made a regular practice of it in the quiet pre-dawn hours of early morning. The

pit bulls would stand silent. They did not cock their heads like others dogs, but looked straight-on. In the semi-dark their eyes were gold. They were gentle and dignified, grandfatherly in their affection. A wet nose against my knee in greeting, a soft exhale. They were not much for licking—the occasional touch of a warm tongue against an extended hand. Calm, they would resettlement into the cool furrows they'd dug into the dirt, and I would lie down with them.

From the outside, I would see the house light one window at a time, a trail from my parents' bedroom, through the kitchen, leading down the hall to the bathroom. I waited—pressed belly-low on the damp earth, chin hooked over a watchful dog's back—for the time that one of them, my mother or my father, would make the two extra steps from the bathroom to my bedroom door, and check on me in my bed, only to find me missing from it. Snails made slow progress across my bare arms, and I thought how it would be to have to reveal myself to them, slinking up from the fields to the door like the dog gone through the gate called home again. But they never made the few steps—those two steps—more.

Five A.M., thereabouts, and the stars were flour handprints. My father's truck rumbled in the driveway while he smoked a cigarette, leaning against its waxed bright door. Inside the house, my mother, followed by her little dog, moved from room to room, her head distorted by curlers. They were, in their own way, people who looked after things.

The beneficiary of another man's soured luck, my father bought a fishing camp for a song. He began to spend his weekends on the clear blue water, alone in an aluminum boat, luring trout from the cold shadows of submerged boulders. His time otherwise committed, he lined the pit bulls up on the back lawn and sold them at a makeshift auction. In the swagger of certain men, I saw that the dogs would not live well when they left us. My father had cared for them, because they were *his*, and these men would hurt them, because they were *theirs*.

When it was over, my father's pockets fat with folds of bills, and all the dogs hoisted into the beds of trucks and tied down like lengths of timbers, I cried. They were already gone, but I cried as if tears could save them. When I wouldn't stop, my father took me by the shoulders. He said it wouldn't be fair, anymore, to keep them. I said it was not fair

to *me*, not to. He walked me back until my back was against the kennel wall. He said to me, “You’re crying over *dogs*.”

The other day, I was talking to a man, a work acquaintance, someone I like, but don’t know well enough for conversation between us to be easy, and so we were talking about our dogs. If we had children, we would have traded stories about them. In their absence, we wowed one another with the accomplishments of our *canis familiaris*. He had a goofball mix, Dachshund and Shepherd. We did the old joke: *How’d that happen? I’m not completely sure, but a ladder was involved.* We were laughing over it, blushing, and between us there was a sudden little bubble of warmth.

“See?” My boss said. “See?” She moved behind me and began to arrange my hair in a pile on top of my head. “You can’t see this,” she said, “but this is an updo that would look great on a date.”

“I’m not interested.”

She let my hair fall, coming around to stand in front of me, hands on her hips. After a moment, she spun herself across the floor, “Dinner! Dancing!” Recovering from a one-person-dip, wrapped in her own arms, she moaned, “Love.”

“Disappointment,” I said. “Inevitable heartbreak.”

She threw her hands up.

Later, she reappeared, and though hours had passed, continued, “And he’s funny too.” In her hand was an invisible checklist that she marked with flourish.

Beyond goodness to dogs, her lesser criteria included, *no one like your father*—by which she meant her own—and *actually funny*. According to my boss, her father’s idea of humor was to walk into the room eating a garlic dill pickle when she was suffering with the stomach flu. “Boy-o-boy,” he’d say, chewing, open mouthed, “this is one juicy sucker.”

But if there is one kind of man, then isn’t there also another? He claims he’s the same kind of man as the first. He’s the kind of man who shoots a dog, and says a dog is a dog, but really, he’s just the kind of man

who likes to shoot a dog. He likes how it walks beside him, obedient to its death. He's the same man who drowns puppies by the sack-full every spring and enjoys ticking it from the list of chores in his head. He's seen the public service announcements: *Spay and neuter your pets*. But, nobody tells him what to do with his goddamn dogs. He doesn't say so, he wouldn't say so, but he revels in the power of injury, both caused and received. He's always angry, never satisfied with the attention paid to him. He's the same man who feels a sickness in his body and curls around it. He's the man who screams the surgeon is a witch doctor and throws his tray at the nurse. His wife and sons apologize to him, and later, far from earshot, apologize for him. When he recovers, his sons drink, because their father is a tough old bastard, who all his life has set out to do harm and they hate him, and they love him too.

The baby, crying through the floor, wrenched me from a dream. In it, my dog and I were at a fair. We walked arm in arm, the way girlfriends who have known one another since childhood do. We had two tickets left, and toured the grounds slowly, trying to choose our final ride. Each breath was nauseating and delicious, the air dense with the hot smells of manure, fry oil, trampled grass, burnt sugar, and industrial grease. What we settled on was The Tunnel of Love, and boarded our flimsy plywood boat with laughter ready in our throats. Green double doors painted with vines and fronds opened into darkness—black water, black air. Then, like Christmas lights on a faulty length of wire, blinking two at a time, on then off, returning with a half a dozen burning bulbs, then two dozen, a bright stutter becoming a steady glow, the water was marked with golden cuts of illumination. As we floated past, I saw the lights were eyes. Their flickering showed us a cave—stalactites, stalagmites—a cage of teeth, cradling us together.

I go, and I check on my dog. She's a sleeping crescent of soaring muscle and bone. *And the cow jumped over the moon...*

Her dreams must be full of flight. Clearing the top strand of barbed-wire that divides one grazing field from the next, or over the pickets of a low white fence that would keep her in a small, neat yard, domestic—or maybe she, an instinctual killer, hangs suspended with a dream rabbit's white neck a jaw-snap away, waiting, raw with longing, for her teeth.

An appointment made must be kept. This is basic etiquette. Normally, in the car, for safety's sake, I make my dog stay in the passenger seat. But today I let her have my lap, and I drive so slow that she can put her head out the window and draw big bully snorts of air without having to squint against the force of the wind.

In the parking lot, my heart is a gyroscope, its momentum failing. I clip on her leash. I would like to carry her, but she is shivering with excitement, pulling against the pace I would set. Smart girl: she knows what doors free biscuits live behind. We jog because she wants to. I stop at the stairs. She climbs them. I can't. I have to hold the railing. For a moment she's patient with delay then looks back at me and whines. Because my heart is red wreckage, and because she cannot know it, I joke with her. I say, "I don't know what *you're* complaining about."

I'm the one, after all, that'll be walking out alone.